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DURABLE SKILLS

Cedar Falls CAPS

Where Eighteen Weeks Proves Enough to Transform

Cedar Falls, Iowa · Semester-Long Intensive Program · ~240-300 Students Annually



“CAPS has helped me find my purpose and build up my confidence in many different aspects. Just because we are exposed to a lot of different things and environments, I now have confidence within myself that I am capable of anything that comes in my way.”

— Hailey, Education Strand

School Snapshot

Location	Cedar Falls, Iowa; consortium supports five additional partner districts (Denver, Hudson, Charles City, Wapsie Valley, Jesup)
Type	Semester-long intensive program within Cedar Falls High School; half-day elective for juniors and seniors
Enrollment	~240-300 students annually across six strands; 70% of Cedar Falls seniors by 2025
Daily Commitment	2 hours of team time (plus travel), totaling 225+ contact hours per semester
Strands	Business Solutions, Careers, Education, Industries, Medical Services, Certified Nursing Aide (CNA)
Philosophy	Intensive semester-long professional immersion producing transformation typically associated with year-long or multi-year programs

Who They Serve

CF CAPS serves juniors and seniors through a competitive application process. Since 2017, over 1,000 students have participated. The program operates as a consulting-firm model with teams of associates working on projects, emphasizing project management skills and team dynamics rather than one-to-one internship placements. Maximum class size is 15 students, enabling personalized attention. Partner districts have their own CAPS programs in their communities, grounded in the principle that community-based learning is vital to each program's success.

92%	report confidence in awareness of local career opportunities (up from 21% at program start)
85%	gain clarity on post-graduation plans
90%+	understand professional workplace expectations
40+	community partnerships providing genuine work opportunities
Public Speaking Credit	earned by all strands except CNA, serving as both English graduation credit and college credit required by Iowa regent universities
OSHA Training	provided through the Industries strand

What Makes It Distinctive

- **Semester-long intensive:** 18 weeks of daily immersion creating sufficient intensity for genuine professional identity formation
- **Consulting-firm team model:** students work as project teams on authentic client work, not individual internship placements
- **Design Sprint in Week 1:** students present to audiences of 50-100 people in their first week, establishing expectations immediately

- **Five Performance Standards** with 10 sub-skills each, assessed through a dual pathway system (mastery OR significant growth)
- **6-12-18 week evaluation cycle** with structured reflection making growth visible and transferable
- **Real client implementation:** student work adopted by organizations including City of Cedar Falls and the school district

Opening: From Paralysis to Confidence

Hailey arrived at CF CAPS terrified of the very activities that would define her time in the program. Standing before a kindergarten classroom managing 20 energetic five-year-olds would have been unthinkable just months earlier. “I was very nervous to teach lessons, talk to everyone in the classroom, and take over the teacher’s job.”

Yet by semester’s end, Hailey reflected with profound pride: “I now have confidence to teach even when I’m not fully prepared to. I also have confidence to build more and more relationships with all of the students. Because of all of this I know I am even more passionate about becoming a teacher one day.”

Her transformation wasn’t miraculous. It was systematic. Across two 18-week semesters, Hailey taught math centers to elementary students every Tuesday, completed multiple classroom placements involving dozens of lessons, delivered numerous presentations to increasingly large audiences, and reflected regularly on her developing capabilities. She adapted on the spot when planned materials weren’t available (“they were supposed to have counters, but none of the classrooms have that, so instead we have them use their markers”). She learned to teach without full preparation when her physical education mentor would unexpectedly say, “Alright, you’re teaching the next period.” By late placements, she functioned essentially as an independent teacher with mentors observing rather than actively co-teaching.

The relationships she built proved lasting. A year later: “I will still come to work at the elementary school, and I will see my past second graders, and they will all still run up to me and give me a hug.”

The Model: Intensive Semester Immersion in Professional Work

Cedar Falls CAPS, established in 2017, demonstrates that intensive durable skills development can occur in semester-long timeframes when properly designed. The program operates within Cedar Falls High School as a half-day elective. Students commit three consecutive periods daily for 18 weeks. The compressed timeline, combined with daily immersion, generates sufficient intensity for genuine professional identity formation.

Five Performance Standards

CF CAPS organizes all learning around five comprehensive standards, each containing ten specific sub-skills tracked through four proficiency levels (Beginning, Developing, Proficient, Exemplary): Globally Competent Servant Leader (serving others and engaging diverse perspectives), Effective Communicator (professional communication across contexts, including collaborating, facilitating compromise, managing conflict, demonstrating active listening), Finding Purpose (discovering the intersection of passion, skills, and market opportunities), Emerging Innovator (adaptability and creative problem-solving), and Developing Professional (workplace behaviors essential for success).

The assessment system’s distinctive feature is its dual pathway to proficiency. Students demonstrate competency either by achieving mastery in 8 of 10 sub-skills within each standard or by showing significant growth across the semester. This honors different developmental starting points while maintaining high expectations. A student entering with severe speaking anxiety who improves from “can’t speak” to “nervous but can present” earns recognition for growth even if absolute skill level remains developing.

The Design Sprint: Immersion From Day One

Within the first week, before students have memorized teammates' names, they face the Design Sprint. Teams receive a client brief and have just days to develop and present solutions to audiences of 50-100 people including professional panelists and clients who will make implementation decisions. One student described freezing mid-presentation before eighty people, calling it "a catastrophe." But that same student was "looking forward to my final speech" by semester's end. The immediate immersion establishes expectations before students can default to typical student behaviors.

Retrospective Competency Recognition

Rather than pre-teaching skills then testing mastery, CF CAPS creates experiences requiring capabilities, then helps students recognize through reflection what they employed. Business Solutions instructor Mark articulated this: "I think it's more of catching it in the retrospective. We have a retro with almost everything that they do, and they start to realize, 'Hey, I am being an effective communicator' because I'm able to facilitate a meeting, I'm able to facilitate a group discussion."

Seen Through a Durable Skills Lens

CF CAPS didn't build its framework from durable skills research. They built it from deep knowledge of what employers need and what their students lack. What they constructed aligns remarkably with the research. The Effective Communicator standard maps directly to Communication. Emerging Innovator captures Creativity, Fortitude, and Growth Mindset. Developing Professional develops Character and Metacognition. Finding Purpose builds Agency and Informed Vision. And the dual pathway assessment, honoring growth alongside mastery, operationalizes Growth Mindset structurally. The convergence follows the same pattern seen across the study: authentic engagement with what graduates need produces frameworks that converge with the research.

In Practice: Two Student Journeys

Marcus: From Quiet Anxiety to Confident Professional

Marcus entered CF CAPS Careers strand carrying anxiety visible in his body language. "When I don't, like, know a lot of people, I'm, like, pretty quiet. Just like, thought of being wrong." His sweaty palms during handshakes physically manifested his nervousness around professional interactions.

Yet something shifted immediately. Mark noticed from the first weeks: "Week one, week two, you were always given an answer when it's pretty intimidating to a lot of people to do that." The fear was still there, but Marcus pushed through it.

By week six, the physical transformation was evident. When Mark asked how CAPS was going, Marcus opened with: "Going pretty great. Learned a lot of things, worked on my handshake, hands aren't always sweaty anymore, okay, we're confident." From sweaty to dry palms, a physiological indicator of genuine anxiety reduction.

The Design Sprint presentation challenged his newfound confidence. "Going up on stage, like, on the way there, I was like, oh, shoot." But he pushed through and learned a critical lesson: "Definitely put in more practice, more than you think you need. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse."

Career discoveries in real estate and finance required cold outreach to professionals and genuine conversation during job shadows. He built a professional network while still in high school, meeting realtors at Oak Ridge and Gallagher. By semester's end, Marcus had a concrete career plan: "By getting my real estate license once I get out of high school, and then going to college for finance, I can kinda merge those two together and hopefully open a business someday." This wasn't vague aspiration but concrete strategy grounded in authentic professional exposure.

THROUGH A DURABLE SKILLS LENS: COMMUNICATION · FORTITUDE · AGENCY · GROWTH MINDSET

Marcus's physical transformation (sweaty palms to confident handshake) makes visible what the research calls Fortitude: the capacity to persist through discomfort toward a meaningful goal. His career discoveries demonstrate Agency, the shift from waiting for opportunities to actively creating them through professional outreach. And the Design Sprint lesson ("rehearse, rehearse, rehearse") represents Metacognition: understanding what his own learning process requires.

Tessa: From Solo Worker to Collaborative Leader

Tessa entered Business Solutions with a clear self-image: "individual person" who "only liked working by myself." Group work meant frustration, compromise, depending on others who worked differently. This wasn't a preference. It felt like an identity.

The Design Sprint forced immediate confrontation. "I didn't like to share my ideas because I was kind of scared that my group would reject my ideas or make fun of them." Her written reflection captured the paralysis: "At first we just sat in silence waiting for someone to talk first."

But something shifted through repeated experiences. Tessa discovered: "If I share my ideas, it, like, helps other people also share theirs." Her participation didn't just express her own thinking. It enabled the whole team to function. When Mark validated this insight, she began understanding group dynamics differently.

The startup showcase project brought a completely different challenge. Tessa became "the only person working on this project," managing client relationships and event logistics independently. The forced independence paradoxically built her appreciation for collaboration. She learned when team support mattered most by experiencing its absence.

When software failure threatened the startup showcase, Tessa's team had to pivot fast. "When the software, like, we couldn't use it anymore, we had to work around that and then try and think of other things we could do. That helped us collaborate with more ideas." The crisis revealed something unexpected: obstacles could strengthen rather than weaken team dynamics.

When Mark asked for one word describing her CAPS experience, Tessa's answer captured everything: "Collaborative." Complete identity reorientation. The student who defined herself as an "individual person" now chose collaboration as her defining experience.

THROUGH A DURABLE SKILLS LENS: COLLABORATION · COMMUNICATION · FORTITUDE · METACOGNITION

Tessa's story challenges a common assumption about durable skills: that they develop incrementally through gentle encouragement. Her transformation required structural confrontation with her self-limiting identity. The consulting-firm team model didn't ask if she preferred solo work. It placed her in teams where collaboration was survival, not choice. Her discovery that sharing ideas enables others' participation represents sophisticated understanding of Collaboration as relational, not transactional.

What Makes It Work: Where Cedar Falls CAPS Excels

Every school in The Path Forward study embraces the three core principles and draws on the four amplifiers to varying degrees. CF CAPS demonstrates all of them. Three stand out as genuinely distinctive.

Authentic Experiences: The Consulting-Firm Model

CF CAPS operates more like a consulting firm than a school. Teams of students (“associates”) work on genuine client projects where deliverables either get implemented or don’t based on professional merit. The City of Cedar Falls social media campaign went live across municipal platforms. The school district adopted a student-created para-educator recruitment video as their official tool. Basketball game highlight videos played before hundreds of spectators on the school’s state-of-the-art video board.

The consulting-firm structure creates dynamics distinct from individual internships. Students manage team dynamics, coordinate with shifting stakeholders, navigate client feedback, and maintain quality under real deadlines. When Peyton’s team’s primary client shifted from the athletic director to the basketball coaches mid-project, the team learned that “making sure the coaches like the video as well as the players was really important.” Client communication happens weekly, with more formal in-person meetings every two weeks, creating ongoing professional accountability across the 10-12 week project cycle.

Education strand teaching placements provide a different form of authenticity. Students teach real children whose learning genuinely depends on their effectiveness. Hailey’s kindergarteners didn’t know she was a high school student practicing teaching. They just knew their teacher. When they grasped concepts she’d taught, “I would feel very accomplished.” When they didn’t, real learning opportunities were lost.

Structured Reflection: The 6-12-18 Week Evaluation Cycle

CF CAPS’s three-point evaluation cycle is the most deliberately designed reflection structure in the study. At weeks 6, 12, and 18, every student completes written reflections addressing three questions: What did you learn? Why is it important? How will you use this in the future? These questions operationalize metacognitive transfer, ensuring students don’t just accumulate experiences but extract transferable learning from them.

The cyclical structure enables comparison across time. Students examining week 6 reflections alongside week 12 and 18 can see concrete development. One student noted: “I can see how my thinking about Communication changed. In week 6, I wrote about basic stuff like ‘I gave a presentation.’ By week 18, I’m analyzing audience adaptation and message effectiveness.”

Individual performance conferences at each evaluation point provide coaching conversations, not just assessment. Mark’s approach after every client meeting: “Hey, tell me how it went. Tell me what you learned. What went well? What didn’t go so well? What deliverables did you give your client?” These immediate retrospectives while experience remains fresh help students process what happened and plan next steps.

Beyond the formal cycle, instructors began referencing an informal “CAPS IT” standard representing excellence beyond minimum requirements. Mark explained to one student: “You have fours in all of your standards because of the work you put in on the front end, but then also always going above and beyond. It’s almost like you say it’s not quite good enough. And you continue to tinker with it until it is to your standard.” This captured the competency-based mindset: developing professional standards and continuous improvement habits that transcend “did I meet the requirement?”

Progressive Complexity: Transformation Within a Single Semester

CF CAPS compresses progressive complexity into 18 weeks, proving the principles work even in dramatically compressed timeframes.

Weeks 1-3 establish foundations through the Design Sprint and initial immersion. Students present to authentic audiences of 50-100 people in their first week, establishing expectations immediately. Education students observe mentor teachers extensively before taking instructional responsibility.

Weeks 4-9 bring increasing independence. Education students transition from observing to co-teaching to delivering full lessons. Tessa captures the shift: “I didn’t like share my ideas because I was kind of scared. But I’ve gotten better at trying to collaborate with everybody, and sharing my ideas.”

Weeks 10-18 demand professional-level performance. Demo Day presentations (week 11) require 15-minute presentations to 35+ stakeholders including clients, parents, and community members. Final presentations (week 18) involve comprehensive project outcomes before community audiences. Education students function increasingly independently with mentors observing rather than actively co-teaching.

The dual pathway assessment proves essential for making this compressed progression work. Because students earn recognition through significant growth or absolute proficiency, those at different starting points can all experience appropriately challenging progression within the same 18-week timeframe.

Beyond Skills: Agency, Identity, and Possibility

What CF CAPS ultimately produces extends beyond capabilities. It produces agency, professional identity, and informed vision.

Agency develops through structures requiring self-direction. Students secure their own career discoveries through cold outreach to professionals they don’t know. Chloe completed five despite only one being required. Natalie persisted through rejections reaching out to Broadway stage managers. The habit of creating opportunities rather than waiting for them transfers well beyond the program.

Professional identity forms through authentic work that professionals validate. Peyton didn’t simulate marketing. She created a recruitment video the school district adopted as their official tool. When Mark’s mock interview partners evaluated her, they said: “I would love to hire Peyton.” Hailey didn’t practice teaching. She taught real children who still run to hug her a year later. These identities are grounded in demonstrated competence, not aspiration.

Informed vision appears in the specificity of students’ post-program choices. The 92% career awareness rate (up from 21%) represents a 71-percentage-point increase in one semester. Marcus’s real estate and finance plan emerged from authentic professional exposure. Hailey confirmed teaching as her calling through 80+ hours in actual classrooms and discovered she prefers younger children: “My personality just matches better with the younger kids.” Some students discovered what they didn’t want, which proved equally valuable.

Transferable Notes for School Leaders

Intensity compensates for duration. CF CAPS’s 2-hour daily team time creates 225+ contact hours per semester, more than many year-long electives meeting 50 minutes daily. Schools unable to implement year-long programs can achieve meaningful outcomes through semester-long intensive experiences. The key is genuine daily immersion, not occasional visits.

Assess growth alongside mastery. The dual pathway (8 of 10 skills proficient or significant growth) ensures students entering with challenges aren’t permanently defined by their starting points. A student moving from “can’t speak” to “nervous but can present” deserves recognition. Growth-focused assessment reveals development that performance-only assessment misses entirely.

Let students discover competencies through authentic work, then name them. The retrospective competency recognition approach, creating experiences requiring skills then helping students

charter flexibility, substantial investment in physical infrastructure (\$2M+ in professional studios), a founding culture built over nearly three decades, and a community that has come to trust and value the school deeply. Replicating HSRA wholesale is not the point. The point is that the underlying commitments, recognizing student assets, investing in relationships, creating authentic experiences, making growth visible, wrapping around the whole student, building in flexibility, can be adapted across very different contexts. HSRA proves they work. The work for system leaders is to find their own version of the question: What do our students' particular gifts, cultures, and communities make possible that we haven't yet built?

This profile is part of a series documenting schools whose approaches have produced remarkable outcomes for students, and whose work, examined closely, illuminates how the capabilities researchers call durable skills develop in practice. It draws on interviews with HSRA students, educators, and leadership conducted during the 2024-25 school year. All student names are pseudonyms.



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